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ABSTRACT

Loyal policy support depends not only on an employee's knowledge of the form and structure of the institution, but also on his ability to influence its operations and goals. If there is ample opportunity for an employee to present his ideas and these ideas are put into action, he is more apt to feel like an integral participant in the district. Conversely, if constructive thought and action are thwarted, informal groups may arise within the district who are opposed to its stated goals. There are many theories of internal communication. One of the most useful is designed to keep employee informed about the structure of the district while at the same time emphasizing the importance of group cohesiveness. This theory considers six aspects of communication--source, message, channels, receivers, effect, and feedback. Ultimately, the responsibility for internal communication rests with the superintendent. (Author)

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THE SUPERINTENDENT'S RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE INFORMATION TO INTERNAL AUDIENCES IN A SCHOOL DISTRICT.

I am sure that most of you are aware of problems that crop up every day due to poor communication between you or your office and other entities in your district -- whether it be principals, teachers, maintenance staff, food services personnel, special services consultants; yes, and alas, even your own central office staff and school board. I doubt if there is a person in this room that is not "battle-scarred" from, pardon the expression, "taking flack" because of communication breakdowns, often when you are not directly responsible.

During recent weeks in South Carolina, the newspapers have been full of accounts of problems in school districts that probably resulted from internal communication failures. Headlines beamed: Consolidated High School Closed because of Failure to Agree on Mascot; Students Boycott Classes; Teachers Threaten Sanctions; and you hear politicians publicly discuss problems that exist in our schools. Surely, you have experienced similar circumstances. The problems can be caused due to poor internal communications from the superintendent, or they can be solved or abated by good internal communications.

Every student in your system, and every person you employ are ambassadors for your district. Their behavior before the public can directly or indirectly reflect upon the school system. It is virtually impossible to have every representative of the schools spread a good impression before John Q. Public, but it is reasonable to assume that a secure, well-informed representative will convey a better impression than one who "doesn't know what is going on."

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Within the past few decades, many school districts have grown from small offices into large organizations. For example, Richland County, South Carolina School District 2's staff has increased from 22 in 1947 to approximately 750 in 1975. Because of this growth, many new functions of the district administration have arisen, and internal communications has become a major problem.

In the early periods of American education, it was relatively easy for superintendents, teachers, pupils, parents and the general public to know and to understand most of what happened at school and in the community. Life was fairly simple, and the community and school were so interrelated that both knew what was taking place in each situation. There have been many changes and innovations in regard to purpose, content, teaching methods, and facilities, including the increasing size of secondary schools, which have tended to confuse the teachers and staff, and to leave it with inadequate information. Terms such as "team teaching," "large-group instruction," "computerized learning," "track plans," and various other "jargonese" indicate just a few examples of such changes. Today's complex and urbanized society demands that public school pupils be provided educational experiences quite different from many of those which present-day parents themselves received when they were in school. The limited and often inaccurate information possessed by citizens concerning the work of the schools further points up the need for more adequate public relations.

Today, education has developed and improved as a profession, and both interest and preparation have to meet higher standards of expectation than before. Accompanying this increased professionalization of the staff are many changes in planning methods, counseling, assignments, evaluation of pupils, parent conferences, disciplinary methods, etc. These changes are a result of the staffing of schools with better prepared teachers who tend

to reflect their training through experimentation and advanced study. Changes need to be understood by the entire professional staff for good coordination and smooth function. Loyal policy support, therefore, depends not only on an employee's knowledge of the form and structure of the institution, but also on his ability to influence its operations and goals. If there is ample opportunity for an employee to present his ideas and these ideas are put into action, he is more apt to feel like an integral participant in the district. Conversely, if constructive thought and action are thwarted, informal groups may arise with the district who are opposed to its stated goals, (for instance, teachers' lounge maffia!).

Ultimately, the responsibility for internal communications rests with the superintendent. However, since the process requ very specialized skills, it is unlikely that he will have the time to do the whole job himself.

In larger school districts the internal communication responsibility may be so great as to require the addition of an internal communication specialist to the public information director.

The following documents are essential elements in the administration of a school district. The extent to which these publications represent the ideas of the district's employees depends on the skillful operation of feed-back systems, as well as the information director's sensitivity to employee opinion.

In large school districts, how can changes in policies, procedures and fiscal plans be explained to all employees effectively? How can the efforts of each employee be brought together with those of his fellow employees in the service of a common end? Finally, how can the insight and creative imagination of all workers be enlisted to solve the

educational problems of the district?

To produce employee confidence in the (superintendent's office or district office) fairness and efficiency, public relations calls for use of special communication techniques. Through use of these techniques, the employee should be made aware not only of his own specific functions, but also of the tasks assigned to others. The policy and procedure of the organization should be outlined for him. He should receive an evaluation of his success and failure.

There are many theories of internal communication. One of the most useful is designed to keep employees informed about the structure of the district while at the same time emphasizing the importance of group cohesiveness. This theory involves six components: source, message, channels, receivers, effect, and feedback.

First, the source. Who is the source? I am the source. You are the source. The superintendent, and all those who directly represent him before internal audiences should be the source. Whatever communication comes out of the superintendent's office should be his decision and his alone. He should be the source. If anyone else in your office takes the responsibility of speaking for you without your permission, I would say simply: you don't need him around!

Second, message. What is communicated should be evaluated. Involvement is a key word here. Principals, teachers, students, and administrative staff can all make valuable contributions in developing the message. However, final authority in matters of content and style should rest with the source.

People utilize many means of communication: words, pictures, diagrams, symbols, colors, sounds, conversation, speeches, letters, memoranda, bulletins, etc., etc. I would like to mention only a few

channels most frequently used by the school superintendent:

One of the most important channels is the policy manuel. It gives every staff member common goals to work toward and helps them determine courses of action to reach these goals. Every policy is more acceptable if all the members of the district office staff, principals, teachers and students have an opportunity to influence its information. Citizens and outside groups should also be involved.

Policy manuals should be kept up to date through continuous evaluation to determine changes required by reorganization, passage of new laws, and adoption of new goals. For easy revision, these manuals should be published in loose-leaf form in a large, readable type. Each policy should be printed on a separate page to allow for replacement.

Copies of the manual should be made available to all members of the district's staff. Each district central staff member, each school principal and each school library should have a copy. Wide distribution helps eliminate needless criticism and inquiry. Copies should be placed in public libraries and distributed to interested citizens' and civic groups. (Policies which gain frequent attention from the public may merit additional publication in an explanatory brochure.) Your public information director should make use of the media to keep the public informed about new policies and revisions.

Another frequently used channel, expecially in these days and times are budget publications. The documents should present fiscal alternatives in order of priority. With costs related to specific programs, the staff can thus make fiscal choices in terms of intended results.

The preparation of the budget is, of course, the responsibility of the district's fiscal personnel, but the assistance of virtually all

professional employees is needed in establishing costs and priorities. Budgeting is, therefore, a valuable internal communication process in its own right.

Policies, budgets, and assignments may require clarification. Without appropriate interpretation, an employee may go far astray. Directives help prevent this, securing common action and understanding. Each directive should be clear and easily understood. It should be free of vague professional jargon, should anticipate possible questions, and should provide specific examples of how a policy will work. A directive should deal with only one topic, thus simplifying revision.

When a new directive is issued, follow-up is imperative. House publications should mention it, and copies should be placed on bulletin boards. Supervisors and principals may find it helpful to call their staffs together and explain the new version.

One of the most effective means of internal communication is publication of a district journal or newsletter that may be distributed from the central office to all schools. Ample copies should be made available for all district staff, principals, teachers, aides, maintenance personnel, and students to take home for parent readership. Also, a mailing list should include all school districts in the state, government officials, industry and business officials, and, certainly, the news media. The latter offers many bonuses in external communication. Newspaper, radio and television reporters often select special items from a district publication and follow up with expanded feature stories. The publication should attempt to give credit and special recognition to members of the entire district staff, especially teachers and students. Such a publication may also be useful in explaining the need for an

increase in bo d indebtedness or tax millage. Infinite uses may be made of district office newsletter.

Good internal communication channels today would include administrative and instructional guides, which make up the bulk of internal communication publications. They may take several forms, such as:

- Handbook for principals
- Guides for budgeting, accounting, auditing and property accounting
- Guides for school plant planning and maintenance
- Public school law bulletins, including summaries of recent legislation affecting education
- Handbooks and guidelines of such personnel as school bus bus drivers, lunchroom workers, and custodial personnel
- Standards for accrediting schools
- Standards for teacher education and certification

Instructional guides may cover such topics of courses of study for the various subject areas, broad curricula for different levels of instruction and separate guides of study. Both administrative and instructional guides are subject to the same production consideration as other district publications.

There are several additional techniques which enhance good internal communications. These include awards, banquets, displays, and open houses. They are not to be mistaken for the whole of internal communication, but are still an important part. They range from elaborate farewell dinners to simple little memos, and they merit close examination. People appreciate a pat on the back. Awards reinforce their self-concepts and build their status in the eyes of others. Recognition, vital to good

employee morale, is not hamstrung by regulations. If a staff member has an article published, or receives an appointment to an educational commission, or is elected president of a local civic organization, it is easy for the superintendent to give him the notice he deserves. Introduction and presentation at a staff meeting and mention in the district journal are two means of accomplishing this. His picture or a clipped newspaper article posted on a well-noticed bulletin board is another.

Expressions of personal interest from the superintendent are a particularly effective means of recognition. A letter from the chief can be sent in recognition of a promotion, an award, a birth, a marriage, retirement, death in the family, or performance of an exceptional job -- even if the chief has already extended personal words of congratulations or condolence.

A letter from the superintendent is also in order when the whole district or a major part of it has accomplished a difficult task or done an exceptional job. Invitations to staff social occasions, letters dealing with across-the-board pay increases, and similar staff communications can appropriately be mailed to home addresses.

The diverse channels can all be effective means to internal communication. Great care and consideration should be exerted in the preparation of the message and the choice of the channel. The channel must be appropriate to the message.

The next link in this internal communication chain is the receiver. Obviously the receiver should be the intended audience, and care should be taken to make sure the intended audience is covered by the channel used. However, it must be recognized that there will be receivers of all messages who compose an unintended audience, or an accidental audience.

Many in-house newsletters serve external audiences as much as they serve the particular school's staff. A school newsletter should reflect the district's position on significant items, but it must serve the personal interest of the school's staff, students, and parents. Because a good internal newsletter has built-in personal interest, there is not need to strain for special editorial effects. Prime needs are for candor, discrimination in selection of subject matter, simple format and the constant endeavor to keep readers up-to-date. An internal newsletter, in short, should be an enjoyable link between a school's staff, students and parents.

Receivers can best be regulated at group meetings, where the intended audience meets face to face with the superintendent. Some behavioral scientists believe that group meetings can frequently change an individual's values because individuals may accept new systems of values and beliefs by accepting belongingness to a group.

A school superintendent can be well-served by conducting periodic group meetings for internal communications purposes. Examples include faculty advisory committee, curricula staff meetings, and bi-monthly administrative staff meetings. The purpose of group meetings should be clearly related to the goals of the district.

People chosen for committee assignments must be trusted by the segment of the staff they represent. They must have opportunities to secure advice, consult with and report back to their constituences. They should recognize, however, that their action in committee need not be a direct reflection of the opinion of their constituents. They should know that the committee process requires a rational compromise between the interests of their constituents, district purposes, and the interests of

other groups in the district -- a compromise with the interest of securing the best possible satisfaction of all reasonable desires.

For example: Richland District 2 is presently developing educational specifications for a new high school. Sixteen committees have been established to accomplish this task. A steering committee is serving to make final decisions. It has met with all sixteen committees and compromise solutions have been reached in each case.

The fifth link in the communication chain is effect, or evaluation. How good is the communication system? Formal procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of internal communications are similar to external research techniques, though perhaps a little more intense. They include employee polls, readership polls, exit interviews, and evaluation interviews. Evaluation interviews can garner important information if they are conducted as cooperative efforts by both administrators and employees. They can help identify an employee's skills, attitudes, and knowledge, and may point toward the next step in the employee's career. The district can find out the realism of its assignments, the effectiveness of its in-service training, the log jams in its coordination channels, and the individual's attachment to the district. It can also gain some idea of the effectiveness of its internal communication.

Finally, the last link in the chain, and one of the most important is feedback. The success of continuous good internal communications is dependent upon feedback. If a group meeting reaches consensus on a proposed action, its success is dependent upon the result of the action only if there is adequate feedback of the result to the group. The superintendent has a responsibility to give feedback to internal groups and internal audiences must give feedback to the superintendent. The

reaction or response to a message is unknown if there is no feedback.

We have attempted to create a strong internal communications chain with six vital links in the presentation. But there is one more little gem to leave with you.

In closing, let us consider this thought. A considerable amount of the superintendent's communication is daily oral conversation. It may be helfpul to remember this little short course in human relations:

The six most important words are: "I admit I made a mistake."

The five most important words are: "You did a good job."

The four most important words are: "What is your opinion?"

The three most important words are: "If you please."

The two most important words are: "Thank you."

The first most important word is: "We."

The least important word is: The perpendicular pronoun "I."